CONTENT WARNINGS

-parental death

- emotional neglect

-darkness

-asphyxiation

[Theme music: “Some Spooky Sh*t Is Going On Here” by Theo Goodwin]

INTRO

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The Underwood Collection, Episode 16: Nevermore

[Tape recorder clicks on. Static is heard throughout.]

ULYSSES

The… how does one discuss the personhood of a mirror? The reflection that used to be Cecil gave me this. I don't know if it'll help me find Frank, but it's an old statement, and I've never seen it before.

In case you're wondering, I've actually gone home and gotten sleep before diving into this, because I'm not an idiot who consumes more statements than I can chew. Read? The—the point stands. Three statements in one day is far too many.

That said, I am here, rested, and verifiably myself, thank every god. *[Papers rustling]*

Statement of Lenore Downing, regarding the death of her father. Original statement given 21st December, 2008. Recording by UC Bamba, Head Curator of the Usher Foundation, Washington DC. Statement begins.

Statement begins.

I was always afraid of the dark. Most children are, of course, and my own fear was rather ordinary, I think. I would wake in the middle of the night from some terrible dream, and stare out into the darkness of my room,

wondering whether I was brave enough to venture from the safety of my bed and out into the hallway to climb into my parents' bed and seek some form of comfort. I never was. My eyes, already tinted with the drowsy fear that comes with bad dreams, would make humanoid shapes out of the shadows, tall and long-fingered, and I would turn and bury my face into my pillow, willing all the bad things to go away.

When I told my mother, all she said was that I was wrong. She told me that darkness was something to love, to respect, that I would one day appreciate it for what it was. Sanctuary, she called it. The way she talked, it sounded like she thought I could always count on darkness to protect me, to wrap around me and hide me from a world too cruel and cold to fully expose myself to.

Obviously, I was not allowed to have a nightlight.

I don't remember my father ever saying much on the topic. He was quiet in an almost timid way, and seemed to live under the rule of my mother. She wasn't a cruel monarch, not in a way I ever saw, but she spoke every word with a finality that left no room for argument. Her word was law, and my father understood this, perhaps the reason why their marriage was less than unremarkable, and always civil. He was kinder about my fears, though. He gave me a knitted raven made from thick black yarn, and told me it would make friends with the darkness for me, so that I would never be harmed. I named it Eddie, and it became my constant companion through

every dark night. My mother may have been displeased with this, but I honestly couldn't have said so for certain.

My mother wasn't the type of person to show her feelings, which always made me feel as though I lived with a sentient brick wall. She didn't ever need to repeat herself, or ask me to do my chores. It was as if my father and I only lived under one spoken rule: My mother was to be obeyed completely. You simply learned what she wanted, and you did whatever you could to fulfill it.

The only time I ever remember her being viscerally angry with me was when I was about seven. You see, I had snuck into her study one day, a daring move as I was never allowed in there without parental supervision. It always looked normal: shelves of books and papers and a large, sturdy oak desk that gleamed in the lamplight. It wasn't particularly remarkable, but I was fascinated with it if only because my mother was so strict about my being alone in there. When I stepped into the room this time, alone, it felt very different from all the other times. There was something...off about it. The air seemed to be roiling with a tension, like two forces were at war with one another.

Underneath all of that, something else pulsed, and though no sound was made, I heard it call to me, coming from the westernmost shelf. I followed it, too curious for my own good. As I understood it, my mother studied anthropology with a focus on religions throughout time, and the

shelf nearly bent under the weight of all the books she owned on the subject.

In the back, however, hidden behind all those books, was a package wrapped in brown paper. I coaxed it out from its hiding place and unwrapped the paper. The cover was some sort of black leather, and on the back were two letters stamped into it: J.L. This was odd to me as neither my mother nor my father's names began with either of those letters. The book seemed to buzz under my fingertips, humming wherever my young hands touched it, and I began to feel uneasy. Still, I was nothing if not foolishly intrigued, and had just begun to open it when it was suddenly slapped from my hands. My mother had found me.

I have rarely seen my mother express any sort of emotion, but the unparalleled fury on her face that day still makes me flinch when I think about it. She shouted at me for breaking the rules, said that I needed to learn how to listen, and that if she ever caught me in the study again, I would dearly pay for it.

The book lay open on the ground, and I went to pick it up in an attempt to pay for my mistake, but that made her angrier. She shoved me towards the door and demanded that I leave before I "made things worse." I fled to my room, still shaking.

And I never went into the study again. My transgression was never mentioned, and whoever the enraged woman that had admonished me so

harshly was, she was replaced by my mother once more. And so my childhood remained largely uneventful, until my father's death.

I was fairly young when my father died, about eight or so. Young enough that I was relatively able to move past it, old enough that I felt the gravity of the situation.

It was raining that night, I remember. I remember because I'd woken up, seen shapes in the shadows again, and was nearly brought to tears because of how much the rain pattering against the window sounded like tapping fingers, like someone was gently knocking on the glass, waiting for me to open it and let them in. I lay there, in the pitch black, clutching my raven to my chest with my eyes shut tight, as if the darkness I created was safer than what lay past them.

Then I heard it. A cry, far off and above my head, coming from upstairs, where I knew my parents slept. I wondered, then, if my parents were as disturbed by the storm as I was. I rarely ventured into my parents' room during the night, but something in me felt as though I needed to check on them, and it seemed a kinder destination than the shadow of a tree branch scraping across my window.

I stepped out of bed, still holding my raven. The silhouettes in the room still frightened me, but I could worry less now that my raven could keep the space under my bed from reaching out and sucking me in. I crept out of my room and into the hall, where everything was quiet save for the

ticking of an old clock and the creak of a floorboard under my feet. The moonlight shone through a single slat in the blinds on the window, illuminating my path with a ghostly beam. Dust swirled in the light, and it comforted me so that I was able to make it to the bottom of the stairs. Normally the staircase would fade into utter darkness even in the middle of the day, but now, there was a faint yellow light coming from my parents bedroom. Grateful for the light, I made my way up the stairs and towards their room. Had I known what I would see, perhaps I would have had far more trepidation; perhaps I never would have gone up at all.

The bedside lamp was on, and cast distorted gray shapes on the wall that convulsed with the figure that lay in my parents' bed. It was my father, I realized as I stood on the threshold, that trembled and gasped for air, the sheets twisting around him as he thrashed. At his side stood my mother, a silhouette cast across the floor as she eclipsed the light from the lamp. She seemed like a statue, motionless and rigid as I quietly ventured forward to her side. She glanced over to me and our eyes met for an achingly long moment. At the time, I couldn't be sure what the expression on her face was as she peered down at me, but as I think back, I believe one could have called it 'calculating.' Then it vanished, and she turned her attention back to the bed and the dying man in it.

My father was on his back in the bed, limbs twisted like a doll someone had tossed onto the floor. His mouth was open in a scream, though little

sound came from it. What spewed forth instead was a viscous dark liquid, black and thick and smelling like evening rain. It came from his eyes, nose, ears— everywhere, dripping down his cheeks and temples and staining the sheets. He shook violently, flinging small drops of that pitch here and there, and his hands had become talons that clawed at the darkening sheets as he gasped for air.

Unsure of what I was seeing, I just stood there and watched, paralyzed as he writhed and choked with that blackness spilling over his lips. My mother stared down at him with an almost impassive expression, and said, very calmly, that I ought to call an ambulance. Her voice was oddly gentle and managed to register in the numb fog of my disbelief. I understood it to be an order, and ran for the phone.

The dispatcher was kind enough as I stammered out my address and the best description I could of what was happening: "I think my father is dying." The minute he said he was sending someone to my address, I hung up, my mission completed. For a moment that seemed like ages, I stood there in the dark, trying to figure out what to do next, before wandering back into my parents' bedroom.

My mother hadn't moved at all, just stood there while my father twitched in the bed they shared. I went up to him, and reached for a hand that grasped wildly at the soaking black sheets. I realized then, that I was still holding my raven, as the tarlike darkness on his fingers stained the

black yarn even deeper than I would have thought possible. I told him not to worry, that the ambulance was coming, and he looked up at me through wide, bulging eyes. What stays with me the most, even now, is how afraid he looked. For a while, I thought maybe it was because he was afraid to die. Now, when I remember how my mother's hand came to rest upon my shoulder, I think it was her that he was so afraid of.

He tried to say something, but it died in another flood of blackness that came from him. I watched his eyelids flutter until they slid halfway closed, his body still twitching, and his hand fell from mine onto the sheets. An age later, he went completely still, his chest ceasing in its stuttered rise and fall.

The moment he stopped moving, my mother let out a quiet sigh, and turned from the room, leaving me with my father's corpse. I stood there for some time, trying to process what I had been witness to. I knew that something very bad had happened, that something was terribly wrong, but I had no idea how to figure out the intricacies of it. Finally, I left the room, and found my mother on the phone. As always, she seemed calm, head slightly cocked as she waited for whoever it was to answer. When they did, she simply said, "He's gone now. I'll trust I'll be seeing you soon," and then hung up. I was too stunned to ask her who it was. It didn't matter, anyways, as I could hear the ambulance in the distance and became more concerned with its arrival.

As the sound of the sirens got closer, I watched my mother's face shift from indifference to a despair that only later I realized was feigned. Though my childish mind could not put words to what troubled it so, it was that moment that I think I truly understood that my mother was not someone I could trust.

The rest of the ordeal was fairly standard, I think. The ambulance came, my father was taken to the hospital, and declared dead on arrival. I cried, of course, what child wouldn't? My mother played her part of the numb widow, accepting condolences and rebuffing offers of help. You may think that something like that would have brought us closer together, but I could never get the image of her staring indifferently at my father as he died out of my head. The already large gap between us grew wider, and though I think that was for the best, I have never felt lonelier than any other time during my life.

It wasn't until the funeral happened that things got strange again. My father wasn't a particularly social person, and the remembrance of the life of Paul Downing was almost unremarkable. Almost.

I remember sitting there in my black dress and ballet flats, staring at the urn that held his ashes. We couldn't have an open casket, you see. Apparently no one had been able to get all those black stains off his skin.

At any rate, I remember how, after what few people had come left, my mother stood at the front of the room dressed in black and deep purple. She seemed to be waiting for something.

Someone, I realized later, as the doors creaked open. A man with dark skin and a much darker suit came forth, holding a cane tipped with ivory. His sunglasses were so dark I felt as though I were looking into two deep holes that I could easily fall into.

He was followed by a number of people all in the exact same black suit as him, flanking him in a shape that seemed to mean something to them. They were a somber lot, but seemed oddly peaceful. The uniformity of the group unsettled me, and I'd be lying if I said I didn't stare.

The man walked slowly down the aisle, and all the lights seemed to flicker and dim as he passed. He took my mother's hand in his and spoke softly; all I could hear was the creaky whisper of his voice rather than words. My mother's face remained blank save for a twitch of irritation when the man gestured at the urn. She said something I couldn't hear and the man removed his dark sunglasses, and I saw that his eyes were almost pure white, for his head then turned towards me. Perhaps he couldn't see my physical form, but it felt as though he was examining something far deeper within me, as though he was looking into as much of a soul as a nine year old could have. I watched his forehead crease, and then he turned back to my mother and shook his head slowly. My mother's hands clenched into fists

for just a moment, then slackened. She nodded once, and the man gave the slightest of bows, almost mockingly, and the rest of the group did the same. Then they all turned, and walked out.

I am much older than I used to be. I have seen the world and what those in it are capable of. As much as it sickens me to think I could have come from evil, I think I have come from something very similar to it.

I don’t know if she’ll see this. I don’t know if I’ll be punished for it in some way. But whoever reads this will be working for her, and I need you to know that my mother is not what you think she is. I don't know what you could call her. I don't even know what I could tell you what to do about it. All I can truly say is be careful, for my mother has a darkness in her that I don't think anyone truly human can fully comprehend.

Uh, [concerned laugh] um, statement ends.

[in a tone of “Cool, cool. Actually you know what? Screw this.”] Right. Excellent. There’s something horrible about what can be read between the lines of these last few paragraphs, and there is— *[frustrated rustling of papers]* — absolutely no follow up. Not an interview, not an address, not an emergency contact— oh.

[Sifting papers] Okay, what we *do* have is a phone number. I'm presuming it's Lenore's but I really can't have any idea, considering how haphazardly this file has been put together.

Mog, if you're listening, I'm calling the number for—er, research purposes.

[dialing] [ringing]

LENORE

[Voicemail]

Hello, you've reached Lenore Downing at the Washington Post. If you need a quick response, please email me at ldowning@washpost.com and I should respond by EOD tomorrow. If it's not urgent, leave a message with your name and number, and I'll get back to you as soon as I can. Have a great day.

[Ulysses hangs up]

[dialing] [ringing]

LENORE

[Annoyed]

Hello?

ULYSSES

Is this— May I speak to Lenore Downing?

LENORE

This is she.

ULYSSES

Right. Okay, sorry, I don't mean to pry—just— one second. *[taking it to compose themself]* Alright. My name's Ulysses Bamba; I'm the Head Curator of the Usher Foundation—

LENORE

[Disbelieving laugh] We're done here.

ULYSSES

Wait, wait, wait, wait, wait, listen—

LENORE

Look, Ulysses, or whoever you are. This isn't about me *listening.* You're lucky I even picked up the phone for a stranger— I was curious; sue me. But when I say we're *done*—

ULYSSES

You gave a statement.

LENORE

I *what?*

ULYSSES

Eight or nine years ago. You came to the Foundation, gave a statement about— you gave a statement. Left your phone number.

LENORE

Huh. Well, either way, that was a mistake, and I don't owe you *anything.* Not an interview, not a "follow-up." Nothing. Leave me alone.

ULYSSES

Your mother—

LENORE

Don't talk about my mother.

ULYSSES

Look can you— can you just hear me out?

LENORE

You have a minute before I hang up on you.

ULYSSES

God, thank you, okay— you mentioned that whoever would read your statement would be working for your mum. That's me, I'm the one who read it. And I—

LENORE

You want to know if your boss is my mother.

ULYSSES

Yes.

[Beat]

Her name's Adriene Blake.

LENORE

That's her. And we're done.

ULYSSES

Wait, wait,wait—

LENORE

I am not my mother. And I *am not* going to have contact with her or *anyone* near her Foundation, do you understand?

ULYSSES

I get it! I get it. I do. You don't want to be involved. That's *fine.* I'm not going to make you get involved. But by being in this building— by having this position, *I* am in danger, and my coworkers— who I actually, you know, like, *a lot*— are in danger—

LENORE

I know that. And it's not my job to protect you.

ULYSSES

It's not. I know. But we've already lost someone, and—

LENORE

I— *[sighing— a bit gentler]* I'm sorry. I am. But I've protected myself by walking away and never looking back, and— I don't know if there's anything else you can do. Not when you're dealing with someone like her.

ULYSSES

I just can't— *we* all just can't leave.

LENORE

She's a monster, Ulysses. The way you survive is by running. I'm not going to protect you, but I can give you a piece of advice, and it's to run. Make your life somewhere else. Go where she either can't find you or doesn't care to. I saw my mother in the shadows for years. She was watching me. Just letting me know that I wasn't going to escape, ever. I— god, I almost forgot what that felt like.

ULYSSES

Lenore, I— I'm so sorry.

LENORE

Yeah, well. I have a life now. She's not part of it. And if you know what's good for you, you'll do the same.

[click]

ULYSSES

Lenore?

[beat]

Lenore.

[beat]

Dammit.

[email ping noise, Ulysses clicking around]

I'd say that there's finally some good news, but it's an email from Adriene, so I think that disqualifies….everything.

At this point I'm more willing to believe that this so-called "information" is going to serve to hire a hitman on myself, assuming one doesn't exist already. For professional and legal purposes, that is a joke.

But this… this *means* something. This means that Adriene has killed people, if the testimony of her own daughter and this old recorder are leading me in the right direction...this is proof.

I've just been sent three email addresses and two phone numbers, and I'll bet you anything they're…. curated. This isn't the whole story. For better or for worse, this is my wild goose chase now, and luckily for me, I'm not afraid of the Dark.

End recording.

[click]

[Theme plays]

OUTRO

The Underwood Collection is a podcast produced and distributed by the Pitch Library Creative Team. Find us on Twitter @PitchLibrary, on Tumblr at www.pitchlibrary.tumblr.com, or contact us by sending an email to usherfoundation@gmail.com. The Underwood Theme was written by Theodore Goodwin, and the Underwood logo was created by Maebe. Thank you for listening.

ULYSSES

Mog, I hope you're still listening, because you're the only person I could trust to listen to three blank minutes of tape *just in case*. I found an address for the emergency services that claimed to respond to the crash, and I'm going to check it out. It's a "private company based outside of D.C.," whatever that means.

I should be back in the next few days— and yes, I know what I'm doing, don't worry. I should live.

Wish me luck, all my love, etc, etc.

Just uh,…. don’t tell anyone. I’ll see you soon.

[click]